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Opinion

Mentor hunting bill should pass

Many of us who grew up in the West have cherished memories of being afforded with our parents and grandparents during hunting season. It has long been a Western tradition to pass down a passion for hunting and the skills that go along with it. It's not just inheriting grandpa's old .22; it's learning to do things like he did them — walk the hills he walked, stalk game the way he did it and use his tricks when field dressing a clean kill.

It's hard not to feel that this tradition is more special in Montana than other areas of the country. Here, in a land where a ridgeline gets you a view unsurpassed in beauty, it's hard not to feel like our hunting traditions and heritage are closer to what they were intended to be.

And this passing on of tradition doesn't just start when a youngster gets a hunting license. It begins when children are young and exposed to the wonders of wildlife and the outdoors. Unfortunately, this hunting tradition that so many of us remember is in a state of decline. Experts point to the urbanization of society and the numerous activities that draw the attention of kids these days — from video games to soccer practice. But whatever the reason, the number of hunters nationwide is declining. The most recent numbers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service say that between 1991 and 2006 the number of all hunters fell by 11 percent. It's a troubling trend.

Last week a bill introduced in the Montana Senate by Scott

Belanger, R-Darby, aims to help turn that decline around. Senate Bill 197 would create an apprentice hunter certificate that would allow a child of any age hunt with a mentor who is at least 18 years old, taken hunter's safety and has a valid hunting license.

This law would allow parents to make the decision on when their child is old enough to hunt, not the state. Currently, Montana law states that a child must be 12 years old to legally hunt. However, like any law, this one comes with its share of responsibility. Too many times we print articles about people breaking game laws while out hunting with their kids. This kind of behavior only indoctrinates a new generation of poachers. SB 197 isn't meant to be a chance for someone to put another deer or

elk in the freezer. And those who have that motivation are a detriment to the sport.

This law will provide grandparents more opportunities to pass on a cherished tradition to a new generation before their world is caught up in Facebook and video games. It will give a mother a chance to share with her son or daughter the responsibility and ethics of fair chase. It will give a dad the chance to teach his kids how to slowly release their breath while squeezing the trigger and about how getting too excited to actually take a shot is just part of learning to hunt.

There will be a hearing on Senate Bill 197 on Tuesday in the Senate Fish and Game Committee. For more information, search for SB 197 at leg.mt.gov.

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Bill to allow mentor hunting should pass

Senate Bill 197 could offer children younger than 12 a chance to hunt with a mentor, which would provide an excellent chance to pass on Montana's rich hunting tradition to the next generation.